

It Comes Easy

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This is one of the columns I wrote for Square Dancing Today Magazine back in the 2003.

Recently, I had a friend ask me how long it took to learn how to square dance. I looked at him and saw that he could walk pretty well. I asked him what he would do if he was placed in a big circle with several other people and I asked them to Circle Left and then go Forward and Back. He grinned and described what he would do. I told him, "You already know how to square dance."

I explained to him that "Square dancing" covers a broad set of dance forms where the dancers basically walk through a pattern on the floor in coordination with the movements of other people. There are no "steps" to learn. Anyone who can walk can learn to "square dance." Even people that are in wheel chairs can "square dance" because the movements through the pattern, in cooperation with other dancers, and to music is the basic joy of the dance form.

If you have a talented leader, you become a "square dancer" within the first minute the music is played and you start to move to the instructions of the leader. This fact often surprises many people, including many modern western square dancers who have been through months and even years of lessons. It is a matter of your preferences as to how much you want to participate in the recreation of square dancing.

At this point, in my dance leadership career, I happen to lead many, many dance parties for people who have never danced before or who only dance once or twice a year. These are parties for churches, schools, weddings, country clubs, youth camps, dude ranches, private individuals, and even corporation workshops. The group sizes vary from fifty to several hundred dancers at a time.

Even as a semiretired dance leader, I do 25-30 of these "beginner dance parties" a year. For most of the people, who attend these parties, it is the only dancing they do other than for getting out on the floor and wiggling to "rock-n-roll" music.

For each party, my goal is to teach them as little terminology as I can and let them dance as much as I can. To accomplish this, I have a large repertoire of fun and easy dance routines that use the same small set of dance movements. Most of these movements can be explained while the people are dancing. Sort of dance instructions-on-the-fly.

As the people are following these instructions, they are moving to music and dancing together as a group. The dances may be done in large circles, or facing lines or many other formations such as a "square" composed of four couples. To me, it's all square dancing because it's part of the broad category of "team" dancing that uses the same

set of movements. In the case of the beginner dance parties, a very small set of movements.

This means that prospective dancers can walk through the door of the dance hall and be dancing as soon as they get onto the dance floor, have a full evening of fun, and never have to remember a single dance movement when they arrive for the next dance party. They are “square dancers” in the true sense of the words because they are dancing together as a team and responding to the same instruction set as used by every other square dance caller in the world.

Beginner dance parties often include other dance forms. These include line dances that can be taught in a couple of minutes. A waltz or a two-step put on during the breaks. It depends on the party and the desires of the organizer.

There are many other flavors of “square dancing”. If you like live music, then take a look at the “traditional” dance scene. These dances are normally conducted as “open dances” Anyone can walk in and expect to dance. Usually the leaders, of these dances, like to have the new dancers arrive about 30 minutes before the regular dance starts. Some leader(s) will present a short lesson on a few simple commands and then you join the rest of the dancers.

There is a relatively new dance concept, called Square Dance ABC, where you attend three dance parties in any order. During these dance parties you will be introduced to part of a set of 24 square dance basics in a setting much like a “beginner dance party.” Following the completion of all three “A” or “B” or “C” dance parties, you will have been introduced to all 24 basics and you can attend combined ABC Square Dances.

All of the above comes under the general heading of “community dancing”. These programs are designed to meet the needs of the “casual dancer.” I.e. people who want to sample square dancing or only dance a few times a year.

The above description fits a lot of you. You want to have fun dancing, but you do not want to devote a lot of time learning how to dance. Dancing needs to fit in with all the other responsibilities of your life.

Most of you also do not want to have to worry very much about what to do with your feet. Other than for the simple line dances that may be included, all of the other square dance forms used, only require that you be able to walk and to be able to listen to and respond to directions from a dance leader. That takes a lot of pressure off of people who feel they have two left feet.

Now, let’s talk a bit about the part of the “square dance” recreational scene that is often seen in the news media. Modern Western Square Dancing is for people who have the time and desire to attend an extended set of lessons. The purpose of these lessons is to learn an extensive vocabulary of commands/square dance basics. These are the body movements that make up the dance routine that is executed during a dance.

These movements are not hard to learn and are presented in a progressive series of classes that may extend over several months. All during this time you are dancing with friends and having fun. You will also normally be invited to parties to dance with other people who are in similar classes in your area.

At a point in time when you have, hopefully, learned all the dance movements that will be used at public dances, in your area, you will graduate and migrate to the Modern Western Square Dance scene. This includes numerous club dances, festivals, and conventions where you meet and dance with people from all over the world.

For some people just learning the first set of dance commands is not enough to satisfy their goals. These people can continue to progress to other classes to learn even more square dance movements. After they master these additional movements there are special dances held for dancers with these skills.

How much you choose to learn and how often you want to dance really governs which route you take. Just like some people want to become expert at golf or tennis and play several times a week, there are some people want to become experts at square dancing. Others just want to get out and have fun once in a while. It's your choice.